



# “Keeping the Faith . . . and Growing It”

Texts: Psalm 25:4-5, 8-10; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Ephesians 4:11-15

*a sermon by Elder Steve Wylie*

**September 24, 2023**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

When Pastor Anna first asked me to preach this morning about Intentional Faith Development, the third practice of fruitful congregations, I had to think for a minute. What did I have to say about the development of faith? I had left the church after I first came out as a gay man back in the late 1970s, feeling that the church didn't accept me for who I was. I stayed away from church for about 20 years. If I didn't feel welcome there, why should I go? Some people might think that was the end of my faith journey.

These were challenging times for my parents. Not only had they just found out I was gay, but I had also made the choice to separate myself from the church. You see, my dad was a Presbyterian minister, so losing one of his own kids from the flock was heart wrenching for him. But I assured my mom that even though I wasn't going to church, I still tried to maintain my relationship with God.

And that effort was the start of my personal journey of faith and spiritual development.

Fast forward 20 years. I met Steve in the fall of 1998 and our first date was on Christmas Eve that year. He asked me to go to his church with him the Sunday after Christmas because he was scheduled to usher that morning. He had started attending the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco to meet people and make friends. I told him I hadn't been to a church in a long time, but he told me that this church was different.

Metropolitan Community Church, or MCC, was founded in Southern California by Rev. Troy Perry, a gay man who was raised in the Baptist tradition and believed that the LGBTQ community deserved to have a safe place to worship. The pastors at the MCC in San Francisco had gone to Presbyterian seminaries, and so the worship style at the church felt very familiar and comfortable. Within a month, I was helping with usher duties, and eventually became a communion server and later was elected to the governing board of the congregation.

My mom often said in the early years of my relationship with Steve that she was especially grateful to him for getting me back to church!

When we moved to Evansville in 2004, our next-door neighbor told us that we should come to First Pres, because they were a welcoming congregation, and we would feel very much at home there. He wasn't wrong! While we were here, I was elected to serve as an Elder (the first openly gay person in our Presbytery to serve on Session, a fact that Kevin was very proud of). We helped decorate the sanctuary for Christmas. We cooked meals for the choir. This church became our home until we moved back to California in 2009. And for a long time after that, it still felt like home to come back here.

My personal faith journey has had a few twists and turns. For some of you, that might sound a bit familiar. But the good news is that I have made great strides and feel closer to God than I did all those years ago when I was trying to do it on my own, outside of the church. And thinking about what I was going to say in this sermon today helped me reflect on the milestones in my journey that really helped me deepen my faith:

- I remember one of the Christmas Eve services here at First Pres. Kevin started the service in his robe and stole, and then disappeared behind one of the big Christmas trees up front here and emerged in full Santa regalia. He tied the original Christmas story to the legend of Santa Claus in a way that was incredibly moving and had every child (and many adults) enraptured. He was and will always be my favorite Santa.
- In 2011, I was selected to serve on the Pastor Nominating Committee at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Sacramento, which we joined in 2009. Reading the submissions from all the pastoral candidates was incredibly moving as they described their own spiritual journeys. Every time I read one of those applications, I was encouraged to think about my faith. Learning about these amazing ministers helped to strengthen my faith. Their stories helped my own relationship with God in ways I never expected.
- I had a serious bicycle accident back in 2014 that put me in the hospital for 10 days. I was so grateful to be alive that I talked to God often while I was in the hospital. One of the nurses must have noticed because she asked if she could pray with me. She prayed with me during every one of her shifts while I was there. I will never forget her for that. (Her name was Armentha, by the way.)

Often, recovery programs emphasize spiritual development as a practice to help those with addictions to maintain their sobriety. One such program in Georgia identified eight factors that work together to foster spiritual development: faith, hope, purpose, meaningful connection, forgiveness, acceptance, a sense of belonging, and community relationships.<sup>1</sup> Worshipping at First Pres definitely involves all eight concepts, with a special emphasis on acceptance and belonging. When we moved back here last year, there was no question that we would come back to First Pres, even

though there is a Presbyterian church within walking distance of our house in Henderson. This church has always felt – and continues to feel – like our spiritual home.

There are many ways to enhance your faith development. Bible study, small group gatherings, leadership development programs can all encourage faith development. The meetings to discuss this book help us reflect on what we do well and where we can improve. I'm grateful that there are so many people participating in these study groups. And if you haven't joined a group yet, there is still time! The last two chapters of the book are really important. Even if the group discussions weren't your thing, I hope you'll read the book on your own. It is full of great ideas for helping our church connect with the community and grow in love.

What other books or topics might be good for future small group study? I visited a new, progressive church in Nashville called GracePointe Church on Friday to hear one of my favorite authors, Nathan Monk, speak. When I visited the church's website, I saw that they were currently having two different small group studies. One was called Bible Studies for Grown-Ups, the other was on a book called *Outside the Lines* where the author describes how embracing her queerness helped her enhance her faith.<sup>2</sup> What I found most interesting about the book studies at GracePointe was that they were both led by staff members, not the pastor. Wouldn't it be great if we could have book studies hosted by some of our members?

Other ways to enhance your faith journey can be as simple as a walk in a tranquil, natural setting, or reading a book or article that shows the tenacity of the human spirit. You can listen to music or watch a movie with a strong message. You can also share your life story with others. For many years, I had a gratitude journal where I would write down things for which I was thankful every day. This helped me find joy in simple pleasures of life and avoid negative thinking – especially when I was working at a job that was stressful. All of these activities are ways to keep your faith alive and thriving.

Most importantly, remember that God loves you just as you are. Let that love surround you every day. For a long time, I struggled with that. When you identify as part of the LGBTQ spectrum, you often hear messages that contradict the power of God's love. Just the other week there was a local pastor on TV talking about the "perils" of homosexuality and that the only way out was to ignore our feelings and pretend to be something we're not. Hearing those words brought back memories of all the pain I felt over 40 years ago.

That's why this church is so important to me, and I hope to all of you as well. Our worship is centered on the *unconditional* love of God. We don't have to change who we are in order to receive God's love. It is always there, in abundance, just waiting for us to receive it. As we move forward in the search for our next pastor, we need to be clear that our church welcomes and embraces everyone just as they are, that we worship God with energy and passion, and that we work together to nurture everyone's faith and spiritual development.

Today's scriptures emphasize carrying God with you every day. As it is written in Deuteronomy, when you love God with all your mind, soul, and strength, you are being intentional in growing your faith. You are carrying God's commandments with you as you travel and interact with others. Paul, writing to the church at Ephesus, reminds us that Jesus equipped us to carry out his message through works of service so that we can reach unity in faith by speaking the truth in love. The psalmist writes that the Lord guides the humble in what is right and teaches them the way. When we feel God's presence through the Holy Spirit within us every day, our souls are fed and nourished, and our faith grows strong and mighty.

May it always be so. Amen.

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1) "Spiritual Development," Eagle Overlook Recovery, <https://www.eagleoverlookrecovery.com/spiritual-development/>. November 16, 2021.

2) GracePointe Church, Nashville, TN. <https://www.gracepointe.net>

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